



WHO WIELDS THE POWER?

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 Exodus 1:1-22
 Second Message
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One of the greatest difficulties that Christians face is discerning the hand of God during times of prolonged darkness. In the absence of God's voice, what does the Christian do with unrelenting illness, unjust divorce, timeless depression, unemployment, or the death of a loved one? Historically, it has proven even more difficult for Christians to know how to negotiate their way while they are living in the grip of tyrannical regimes that suppressed every vestige of justice. The Bible does not give simple answers to these mysteries, but it does encourage us with accounts of what God was doing in other extremely dark times.

The social conditions described in the opening chapters of the book of Exodus do not appear much different from those in Nazi Germany during the 1930's. In fact, Hitler's unspeakable "Final Solution" looks as if it might have been lifted from one of the pages of Pharaoh's handbook. Faced with the reality of the Holocaust, in an effort to hold onto their belief that God is good, many rabbis came to the conclusion that he must not be sovereign. They surmised that God loves us and suffers with us, but is hindered in his ability to act and save us.

Our text from Exodus gives a different answer. Instead of burying us in the dark shadows of "death camps," it gives us eyes of faith to see where God is at work behind the scenes, and the type of instruments he uses to overthrow the prevailing forces of darkness. In the end, we learn that in God's kingdom, life, not death, will prevail.

The backdrop for the Exodus drama is given in the first seven verses of the book, all of which resonate with life.

Introduction: A small family becomes a multitude in Egypt (1:1-7)

Now these are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob; they came each one with his household: Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah; Issachar, Zebulun and Benjamin; Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. All the persons who came from the loins of Jacob were seventy in number, but Joseph was already in Egypt. Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that generation. But the sons of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly, and multiplied, and became exceedingly mighty, so that the land was filled with them. (Exod 1:1-7 NASB)

The book of Genesis ends with the story of Joseph, who saved Egypt from starvation during seven years of famine. The severity of the starvation conditions forced Joseph's family to come down to Egypt to buy grain. There, through a miraculous chain of events, they were reunited with Joseph, restored as a family, and blessed by Pharaoh with the best land to settle in.

In these introductory verses (1:1-7) the narrator looks back to Jacob's sons and brings the reader up to date with the death of the first generation. He then looks ahead to Israel's future, emphasizing the miraculous fertility of Jacob's descendants. In verse 7 he uses no less than five verbs to describe Israel's amazing growth. Several of these verbs were used in different combinations earlier in Genesis (1:22, 28; 8:17; 9:7) to describe the fertility of God's creation, but only in this verse do we find all five.¹

This portrays Israel's population explosion as miraculous, and draws attention to the fact that God was beginning to fulfill his promise to Abraham to give him a seed as numerous as the stars of the heavens (Gen 15:5). The phrase "sons of Israel" which frames these verses will become a key phrase in Exodus (occurring 125 times), reminding us that this small clan had now grown into a nation, just as God had promised. God is keeping his promise, so *life* is everywhere! Against this backdrop of Israel's supernatural growth the drama of the Exodus unfolds.

Our text has two parallel sections, both dealing with Pharaoh's plan to solve the "Jewish Question."

Pharaoh's Plan A to solve the "Jewish Question" (1:8-14)

- A Pharaoh's plan: Thwart fertility by harsh servitude
- B Implementation of the plan – storage cities built
- C Pharaoh's plan backfires and produces more fertility
- D Whole population intensifies and broadens the servitude

Pharaoh's Plan B to solve the "Jewish Question" (1:15-22)

- A' Pharaoh's plan: Thwart fertility by population control
- B' Plan not implemented, midwives disobey and lie to Pharaoh
- C' Pharaoh's plan thwarted, more fertility produced
- D' Pharaoh "commands" the whole population into a "final solution" by drowning Jewish sons in the Nile

I. Pharaoh's Plan A to Solve the "Jewish Question" (1:8-14)

A. Pharaoh's Plan A: Thwart fertility by work camps (1:8-10)

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, "Behold, the people of the sons of Israel are more and mightier than we. Come, let us deal wisely with them, or else they will multiply and in the event of war, they will also join themselves to those who hate us, and fight against us and depart from the land." (1:8-10)

With the ascent of a new Pharaoh in Egypt, the fortunes

of the sons of Israel take a downward turn. The phrase, he "did not know Joseph," sends a tremor through the heart of the reader. Joseph's memory has faded from history, and a new political climate of paranoia is spawned. The Hebrews were not the only Semitic population to pose a threat to Egyptian rulers. During the 18th to 16th centuries, several ethnic groups (the Hyksos) had infiltrated Egypt from Canaan and gradually taken over more and more political control. This state of affairs infuriated the Egyptians. Sarna explains:

By ca. 1720 B.C.E. they were fully in control of the eastern Delta of the Nile and had established their capital at Avaris...Gradually, Semites replaced Egyptians in high administrative office...The Hyksos occupation was a shameful humiliation for the Egyptians that had a profound effect upon the national psychology. About one hundred years after the liquidation of Hyksos rule, Queen Hatshepsut (ca. 1480-1469 B.C.E) had carved above the entrance to the rock-cut temple she built at Speos Artimedos, (Istabl Antar) in Middle Egypt, an inscription in which she recalled the ruination of the country caused by these Asiatics.²

This historical backdrop helps us understand the anxiety of the new regime. The first words we hear from the new Pharaoh are governed by fear and prejudice. This expanding group of immigrants poses an increasing threat to his rule. To fuel the flame among the population, he engages in a propaganda campaign, coming up with a hypothetical situation of a foreign invasion, followed by an uprising and evacuation of the Israelites. This would have had severe consequences to the national economy. The irony is that Pharaoh speaks better than he knows. The Israelites will indeed join an enemy, God himself, who will fight against Pharaoh and take Israel out of Egypt by force.

To combat this widespread fear, Pharaoh urges a shrewd ("deal wisely") approach of enslaving the Hebrews to break their spirits and control their growth. Political measures become tools for immoral ends.

Pharaoh's spirit still prevails today. It is often heard in our nation, especially in this valley. Whenever we adopt the attitude of "fear" towards immigrants because they pose a threat to our "way of life," we are siding with Pharaoh and the devil himself. We are standing in direct opposition to our Creator-God. The Christian spirit is one of welcome, of embracing the foreigner with hospitality and grace, knowing that God is at work, directing population movements to expand his kingdom. Immigrants do not pose a threat, but a divine opportunity.

B. Pharaoh's plan implemented (1:11)

So they appointed taskmasters over them to afflict them with hard labor. And they built for Pharaoh storage cities, Pithom and Raamses. (1:11)

To curtail the population explosion, Pharaoh gathers all the male work force into labor camps. There they are placed under the authority of taskmasters who rule with an iron fist, handing out severe punishments and using fear to motivate them. Pharaoh is hoping his "work camps" will in actuality become "death camps." Houtman notes how "Herodotus (*Hist.*, II, 158) relates that in the restoration of the canal from the Nile to the Red Sea under Pharaoh Neco, 120,000 people perished."³ The storage cities of Pithom and Raamses, built to provide life for the na-

tion, in reality became tools of death.

C. Pharaoh's plan thwarted (1:12)

But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and the more they spread out, so that they were in dread of the sons of Israel. (1:12)

Despite the oppression, the servitude and dangerous conditions, the Egyptians could not put a stop to God's creative powers. The oppression only served to make the "sons of Israel" more fertile and numerous. The result was that a sense of dread fell over the entire population. The Egyptians feared that they were perhaps facing a new, mysterious "force" more powerful than Pharaoh himself.

We find this same prevailing "life" in the gospels and the book of Acts. Jesus appoints a small band of 70 disciples to go throughout the cities of Israel, preaching the kingdom of God. On the day of Pentecost, the small band miraculously multiplies to 3000; then in a short time another 5000 are added. So threatened are the Jewish authorities, now playing the role of Pharaoh, by this new life ("you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching," Acts 5:28), they imprison and in some cases martyr the leaders of the church. But after each attack of the devil's violent hand the church continues to grow and spread. As we learn so well in the history of the church, "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

D. In frustration, Pharaoh intensifies his plan (1:13-14)

The Egyptians compelled the sons of Israel to labor rigorously; and they made their lives bitter with hard labor in mortar and bricks and at all kinds of labor in the field, all their labors which they rigorously imposed on them. (1:13-14)

Rather than "acting wisely" and reflecting on the experience, the frustrated Pharaoh denies what he sees, strengthens his resolve, and increases the oppression. Israel's slavery is broadened and dramatically intensified by enlisting the whole population. Five times the narrator uses the Hebrew root '*abad*' ("to serve" or "labor") to portray Pharaoh's resolute determination to counter the five verbs of Israel's life-giving fertility in verse 7.

To get a feel for the gravity of the situation, Sarna, who has done a study of the Egyptian documents, gives a graphic description of the work carried out under Rameses II, who built his capital near the Israelite settlement. Intolerable daily quotas were imposed upon the slaves, which some records indicate were as high as 2000 bricks a day. (Scholars differ on the exact date of the Exodus, but these texts provide insight into the social conditions in Egypt.)

The building program inaugurated by Rameses II required an inexhaustible supply of bricks...It is calculated that it took about 24.5 million bricks to construct [the pyramids at Dahshur]...The..."Satire on the Trades" has this to say of the brickmaker and the builder: 'He is dirtier than vines or pigs from treading under his mud. His clothes are stiff with clay; his leather belt is going to ruin. Entering into the wind, he is miserable...His sides ache, since he must be outside in a treacherous wind...His arms are destroyed with technical work...What he eats is the bread of his fingers, and he washes himself only once a season. He is simply wretched through and through."⁴

Besides making bricks, the Israelites “were requisitioned for the maintenance of the irrigation ditches, dikes, and canals, having to clean out the mud deposited by the inundation of the Nile.”⁵

Picture the Israelites returning home each day, caked in mud from head to toe, passing out in a state of complete exhaustion. These cruelties left an indelible stamp on Israel’s national psyche. God would use the memory of their slavery to shape their souls with an abiding compassion for the alien, the orphan and the widow. As God often reminded them,

“You shall not pervert the justice due an alien or an orphan, nor take a widow’s garment in pledge. But you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and that the LORD your God redeemed you from there; therefore I am commanding you to do this thing.” (Deut 24:17-18)

In like manner we are reminded in the New Testament to remember the “slavery”(Gal 5:1; Heb 2:15) from which Christ delivered us, and “to visit orphans and widows in their distress” (Jas 1:27).

Even with increased hardship and servitude, the “Jewish Question” remained unsolved, so Pharaoh resorts to Plan B.

II. Pharaoh’s Plan B To Solve the “Jewish Question” (1:15-22)

A. Pharaoh’s Plan: Thwart fertility by population control (1:15-16)

Then the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other was named Puah; and he said, “When you are helping the Hebrew women to give birth and see them upon the birthstool, if it is a son, then you shall put him to death; but if it is a daughter, then she shall live.” (1:15-16)

Since Pharaoh’s political strategy of work camps was unsuccessful, he seeks a more direct approach – that of murdering the newborn. He enlists the services of two Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah. The fact that the narrator speaks of the midwives seven times, mentioning their names while giving the king no name, is his way of saying who really wields the power in Egypt.

Pharaoh commands them to take decisive action at the first signs of life. The term birthstool (*ovnayim*) is difficult; it literally translates as the “two stones.” It can either refer to the male genitals, or the “two stones” which the mother crouched upon while giving birth. Regardless of its meaning, the intent is clear: the midwife was to quickly determine the sex of the child. If it was a male, she was to act in haste and secretly make it appear that he was stillborn. If it was a female, she was to allow it to live.

How can these two insignificant women possibly stand against the power of Pharaoh and the entire nation?

B. Pharaoh’s plan not implemented (1:17-19)

But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt had commanded them, but let the boys live. So the king of Egypt called for the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this thing, and let the boys live?” The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not as the Egyptian

women; for they are vigorous (“lively”) and give birth before the midwife can get to them.” (1:17-19)

Unfortunately for Pharaoh, these two women fear God, not men, and they directly disobey his injunction. Instead of destroying life they fear God and preserve life. Courageously they choose to use their “life connections” to further life, and worry about the consequences later. Upon receiving the news, the perturbed Pharaoh summons the two women to give an account of their actions. Answering his question, they wisely protest their innocence, saying that Hebrew women were far more vigorous (“lively”) than the Egyptians, and therefore delivered their children before the arrival of the midwives – a backhanded insult pointing out the vitality of the Hebrews over the Egyptians. Life prevails!

That the wisdom of the women overpowers Pharaoh is amazing. As Fretheim suggests, “Two lowly Hebrew women silence the king of Egypt, the paragon of wisdom, with a single remark! This is ironic, of course, for no king worth his scepter would have considered the response satisfactory, let alone from midwives.”⁶ Perhaps their wisdom suggests that in confronting evil we must be very “shrewd” in order to maintain the “life connections” that God has granted us.

C. Pharaoh’s plan thwarted with more life (1:20-21)

So God was good to the midwives, and the people multiplied, and became very mighty. Because the midwives feared God, He established households for them. (1:20-21)

God rewarded those who had saved life with goodness and life. The first expression that God was “good” to the midwives reminds us of those wonderful echoes in Genesis 1, when God declared his creation “good.” Because the midwives worked with the Creator of life, not against him, God granted them continued success. Their strategy to preserve life went on unhindered, and Israel continued to multiply. But to show how much their actions meant to God, he grants them something more – a prominent place in Israel, with significant households.

This first case of civil disobedience in the Bible reveals that we never have to ask permission to preserve life against the forces of death. It also reveals the powerful role that women can have for life in dark times. These opening chapters of Exodus center on the work of five women whose courage and faith set the stage for Israel’s deliverance from Egypt. Their model is followed by Rahab, in the book of Joshua, who risked her life to protect the Israelite spies from certain death, providing more time for their escape by lying to their pursuers. Two entire books of Scripture, Ruth and Esther, portray women in leading roles during Israel’s darkest hours. In one case, the tenacious loyalty of a gentile woman rescues a family from extinction, and she is later rewarded by God with an everlasting seed that gives birth to the line of David. In the other, the raw courage of a woman saves the entire nation from annihilation under a foreign power. The New Testament records the courage and faith of two women who, when the world had turned dark and all the men had fled in fear, risked their lives before Roman authorities to offer worship and pay homage to their dead leader. God rewarded their courage with the privilege of being the first witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus.

During Hitler's campaign to exterminate the Jews, a young French woman, Vivette Samuel, took her stand against the Fuehrer. At the age of twenty-two, she defied Hitler's edicts concerning the Jews and began working for the O.S.E. (Society for the Assistance to Children), rescuing Jewish children from deportation to Nazi extermination camps. She got permission from Jewish parents to allow their children to permanently separate from them in order to be placed in non-Jewish homes. Over a period of six months she was able to save nearly 400 children.

D. In Frustration, Pharaoh intensifies the plan (1:22)

Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, saying, "Every son who is born you are to cast into the Nile, and every daughter you are to keep alive." (1:22)

The dumbfounded Pharaoh, now completely out of patience, removes every veil of secrecy and puts all his cards on the table. The chilling edict goes out to an entire population that all newborn males are to be drowned in the Nile. This was Pharaoh's "Final Solution." Work camps become extermination camps as murder becomes national policy. Yet, ironically, the instrument he chooses, water, will be the very instrument of his own destruction, and the daughters he keeps alive will rescue the son who will deliver Israel from the hand of Pharaoh. In the end, the sons he sought to enslave in his tyrannical building projects will be freed as sons to build God's holy tabernacle on earth.

In conclusion, we find that the greatest monarch, with the full force of national power at his disposal, cannot thwart the promise of God to an insignificant people. The text invites our participation. It asks, Whom do we serve, Pharaoh or the living God, the forces of death or life?

"Pharaohs" are to be found everywhere – in government, in businesses, even in homes. Their interest is not life, but control. Their methods may vary, but over time their naked brutality becomes evident. The question is, Will we be like these midwives and have the courage and wisdom to act appropriately? This is no light matter, for the actions of a few can change the course of history.

1. Cornelius Houtman, *Exodus* (Kampen: Kok, 1993), 1:231.
2. Nahum Sarna, *Exploring Exodus* (New York: Schocken, 1996), 16-17.
3. Houtman, *Exodus*, 245.
4. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, 22-23.
5. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, 21.
6. Terence Fretheim, *Exodus. Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 34.

The King (3x) vs. the Midwives (7x) Exod 1:15-22

Inverted Structure

A The king <i>speaks</i> with midwives	1:15
B The king gives the midwives instructions for death	1:16
C The midwives fear God and disobey the king	1:17
X King summons them for an explanation	1:18
C' The midwives (fearing God) lie to the king	1:19
B' God rewards the midwives and Israel with life	1:20
A' Pharaoh " <i>commands</i> " the whole population for annihilation	1:22

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